

## Handout Week Number One: Statesmen and Rogues Mick Chantler, Instructor

### The Founding Fathers and the Enlightenment

No earth-shattering historical shift occurs in a vacuum, and the American Founding is no exception. The necessary cultural, psychological, political and institutional foundations for the American Revolution were decades in the making. In our opening talk we will explore the *ideas* and *attitudes* which created the intellectual infrastructure for such a momentous upheaval. Historians are in general agreement that the founding of a new republican nation (when virtually all other countries in the world were reactionary monarchies) could not have happened without the influence of the European Enlightenment. My central argument today will be that all of the key Founding Fathers were products of the intellectual currents flowing out of the enlightened centers of Europe. More specifically, the leading players in the birth of our nation were deeply indebted to the ideological fermentation bubbling forth back in Great Britain. As much as Americans wished to divorce themselves *politically* from the Mother Country, in no way did they depart from the central *philosophical* assumptions being hammered out in London, Scotland, and in the English Universities.

This is scarcely a shocking or daring assertion. After all, Americans weren't really a separate, distinct people yet in 1775. Most of the inhabitants of the thirteen colonies were still Englishmen at heart. They spoke the King's English; they dressed like inhabitants of the metropole, and obeyed English law. They read English authors, and subscribed to English periodicals. If you were sufficiently wealthy, you sent your son to be educated at Oxford or Edinburgh. New England Merchants conducted much of their business with London traders, and planters sold their tobacco, indigo, and wheat to British buyers. Redcoats from Scotland and Ulster patrolled the frontier country, and more than likely your spiritual life was rooted in some English religious tradition. Given the close ties between the colonies and Old Albion, it would almost be impossible to conceive of a mass movement here that *didn't* come out of an English conceptual context.

When we speak of the Enlightenment, we normally think of French salons, or perhaps of Dutch coffee houses where radical ideas were bandied about as the intellectual coin of the realm. Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, and perhaps Spinoza come immediately to mind. Rarely do we hear of a specifically *English* Enlightenment. But Roy Porter, in his masterly treatment of the Eighteenth Century world entitled *The Creation of the Modern World*, argues that this is an historical oversight. English and Scottish philosophers, economists, and writers carved out their own unique brand of Enlightenment. Perhaps they attract less historical attention than their counterparts on the continent because they weren't as extreme or as vociferous. (The loudest voices will always be heard.) English thinkers had fewer complaints about the state of

affairs in their country than did the *philosophes* of Paris groaning under monarchical and priestly oppression. By the early 1700s, Englishmen had already achieved a significant degree of political and cultural liberty. In London one could, within reason, write and say what one felt without fear of banishment or being sent off to the Tower. Not so on the continent (with the exception of Holland, which had attained the highest level of intellectual freedom western civilization had seen since ancient Rome and Greece. Even Jews in Amsterdam could go about their business free from fear of harassment.) Hence, enlightened British men and women of letters were less strident, less demanding, and generally more contented with their lot than the French radicals. But they still intended to turn the old accepted ways of thinking upside down, and they proceeded to do so with gusto.

What were the essential goals of the British Enlightenment? To dethrone religious superstition, to establish the reign of reason and science, to delineate and implement mankind's "natural rights," and perhaps most importantly, to raise the general level of refinement and politeness in society. For 18<sup>th</sup> Century English tinkers, life was to be *enjoyed*, and not merely *endured*. Gone were the days when people would nod their heads in passive assent when their minister grimly intoned that life was but a vale of tears, and that happiness was not an option here on earth. Away with the medieval notion that political rulers possessed a mandate from God, and were unanswerable to the people's wishes. A new day had dawned, light was streaming in everywhere, and people could now fashion their own destinies.

Many Americans took these ideas quite literally, and hazarded a violent rebellion designed to clear away the accumulated debris of the ages. When Thomas Jefferson wrote that men were entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," he was intoning the sentiments of a hundred years of enlightened British thought.